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The Jews of New York In the Arts, Sciences, and Professions



BY

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the Jews in New York

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The important position occupied by Jews to-day in the arts, sciences and the professions stands in strong contrast with their condition two hundred and fifty years ago. When the twenty-three refugees arrived in 1654, it could hardly be said that Jews had a place in any of these departments, in the old world or the new. In most European countries, restrictive laws were still in full force, while in the German States and elsewhere the walls of the Ghetto were still real and tangible. Even in England, the schools and great universities barred their doors to their admission and with the possible exception of Medicine, access to the learned professions was denied; the few Jews who did become physicians had to rely largely on self-education or the assistance of other Jewish practitioners. After surmounting all these obstacles, the hospitals closed their wards

against them, and this doubtless accounts for the fact that so few Jewish physicians appear from the time of the re-settlement in England, down to the nineteenth century.

The restrictions and disabilities existing in England were reflected in the new world as well. In New York, fortunately, these disabilities were removed nearly half a century before their removal in England.

As to the legal profession, existing disabilities were of little account during the Dutch Regime. There was then no such thing as a distinct class of professional lawyers. Cases were tried before the worshipful court of the Shout, Burgomaster and Schepens, but neither magistrates nor those who pleaded before them pretended to any legal education. In fact, this state of affairs continued into the English period and almost to the close of the seventeenth century. To quote Judge Redfield, "The records do contain the names of a number of attorneys but these attorneys were traders, factors for foreign merchants or, it may be, mechanics, who, possessing a recognized talent for managing affairs, or for penmanship or an easy volubility, were likely to be called on by their neighbors to

act as conveyancers or advocates." So it happens that the names of Jews appear among these early attorneys in New York almost from the date of their arrival. Thus Solomon Pietersen, a Jew, appears as attorney in 1654 and in the court records of New Amsterdam throughout the entire Dutch period, no name is more prominent than that of Asser Levy Van Swellem, whose almost uniform success even against such powerful men as Stuyvesant and Bayard doubtless accounts for the fact that he also appears as attorney for others. He also successfully defended the rights of his people against hostile elements, obtaining the recognition of their rights to trade, the burgher right and the abandonment of a special tax on Jewish settlers.

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, however, New York began to recognize the legal profession as such. The restrictions existing in England then came to the fore, and no other Jewish attorneys appear throughout the entire rest of the Colonial period. The Constitution of 1777 swept away the disabilities referred to, but it was not until 1802 that we meet with the first Jewish lawyer. This was Sampson Simson, who was graduated from Co-

Columbia College in 1800 and admitted to the bar in 1802. His name deserves to be preserved in our annals as the noble founder of Mount Sinai Hospital.

There were but few Jewish members of the bar during the first half of the nineteenth century. Alexander Kursheedt might be mentioned, and at one time S. B. H. Judah was the only one. Prior to the Civil War the most prominent was Jonas B. Phillips, who, for over a quarter of a century, was Assistant District Attorney.

It is only within the past half century, however, that the Jew has attained his present important position at the New York bar. As a jurist the eminent services of the late Simon Sterne in the direction of reform legislation are uniformly recognized. Our recently deceased member, Judge Myer S. Isaacs, won distinction as an authority on real estate law, and two of the leading jurists in the Constitutional Convention a decade ago belong to the Jewish community. To-day we may justly be proud of the learning and integrity of our representatives upon the bench, and of the fact that for the second time within a decade, members of our race have been

honored with the office of Attorney General.

Turning to the art of healing, which was intimately associated with Jews throughout the Middle Ages, it is a curious fact that no Jewish physicians appear in New York throughout the entire Dutch or English Regime, unless possibly Dr. Benjamin Lindner, who is mentioned in 1761, be the sole exception. No legal restrictions seem to have existed. It must be remembered, however, that but forty-four physicians appear in the colony between 1695 and the Revolution, that the medical department of Columbia College, established in 1765, graduated but twenty-three prior to 1800, and that the New York Jewish Community, even as late as 1826, numbered less than 1,000 souls, so that professional men would naturally be few. The first Jewish physician was Dr. Joel Hart, born in 1784, who was educated in England, and graduated from the Royal College of Surgery in London. In 1806, he was one of the founders of the Medical Society of the County of New York, and in 1807, one of the incorporators of the College of Physicians and Surgeons. Long before his time, however, there had been

Jewish physicians of standing in Pennsylvania, South Carolina and Georgia.

In 1819 there was graduated from the College of Physicians and Surgeons Dr. Daniel Levi Maduro Peixotto, who subsequently became favorably known as Professor of Medicine at Willoughby College. Dr. Aaron Lopez appears three years afterward. Later still were Dr. Michaelis and Dr. Mitchell. With the German influx of half a century ago, came Dr. Abraham Jacobi, to-day one of the most eminent men in his profession. Jews are now numbered among the leading specialists and comprise probably over one-fourth of the number of physicians on Manhattan Island.

Among early scientists we meet the name of Solomon Simson, the brother of Sampson Simson, who was Vice-President of the American Mineralogical Society as early as 1798. To-day we are fairly represented in the realms of pure science, chemistry, astronomy, engineering and architecture, and the new buildings of Mount Sinai Hospital attest the ability of a member of this Society.

From time immemorial the Jew has excelled as a teacher. During the Colonial period, however, he could not enter that

profession. During the Dutch period it was in the hands of the clergy; during the English Regime schoolmasters were prohibited from teaching unless they held a certificate from the Bishop of London. In the early part of the nineteenth century, however, some of the best private schools were conducted by Jews. Among these might be mentioned the one conducted by Isaac Harby and his sister in 1828. Dr. Isaac Nordheimer and Prof. George J. Adler might be mentioned as early members of the faculty of New York University. To-day Jewish names appear in various departments of our important colleges and universities and generous gifts from Jews have encouraged learning throughout the State. In the Department of Public Education there is hardly a public school on Manhattan Island where Jewish men and women do not form an important portion of the staff, while one of the most important departments in the education of the public, was organized and developed by a distinguished member of this Society.

The Jew has been no less prominent in that other, and in some respects wider, field of public education—journalism. To

him some of the early newspapers of the State owe their existence. Referring to the early years of the nineteenth century, General James Grant Wilson calls attention to Mordecai Manuel Noah, "whom to omit," he says, "would render incomplete a correct history of the newspaper press of New York City." In 1816 Noah succeeded Judge Wheaton as Editor of the *National Advocate*, of which another New York Jew, Naphtali Phillips, was the proprietor. Noah also established the New York *Enquirer* in 1826, which, under the name of the *Courier and Enquirer* soon became one of the leading papers of the city. Subsequently, for many years, he was the editor of the New York *Sun*, publishing at the same time the *Times and Weekly Messenger*, one of the first attempts to establish a purely literary newspaper. Among other journalists might be mentioned Isaac Harby, Barnet Phillips and the late Morris Phillips, who conducted the *Home Journal* and who has been called the "Father of Society News in America." To-day some of the leading writers on the various papers are men of Jewish race, while among the papers conducted by them may be mentioned the *Press*, the *Globe*, the *World*

and the *New York Times*, which was raised as by magic by a distinguished member of this Society, to the proud position of one of the leading newspapers of the country.

The ministerial profession and its important influence deserves extended mention, but comes more properly under another subject upon the programme this evening.

While the Jew was shut up in the old world ghetto he was constantly charged with having no eye for the beautiful. Those who with malicious eyes peered through the ghetto gates, charged the Jew for not transforming his wretched surroundings into a world beautiful. No sooner, however, had the ghetto gates fallen than this downtrodden race gave to the world a Heine, a Mendelssohn and a Meyerbeer. Despite the small number of Jews in New York as late as 1826, it is remarkable that there were so many literary men among them. Foremost among these was Major Noah, of whom George P. Morris, writing in 1829 says that "he was the great literary and political lion in the city of New York, that he told the best story, rounded the best sentence, and wrote the best play of all his contemporaries, that

he was the life and spirit of all circles, that his wit was everywhere repeated, and that as an editor, critic and author he was looked up to as an oracle." Harby, Judah and Jonas B. Phillips belong to this period. Coming down to our own time, the name of Emma Lazarus has become favorably known, while several Jewish writers, both native and of foreign birth, are not without distinction. Mention might be made of the *Jewish Encyclopedia* in this connection.

In the realms of art, the names of Lazarus, Dessar, Mosler, Loeb and others have won recognition, and art has been encouraged by many princely gifts from Jewish sources.

The genius of the Jew has been prominently connected with the development of the stage in New York. Some of the early New York dramatists, managers and actors were men of Jewish race. Aaron J. Phillips appeared at the Park Theatre as early as 1815 and later as a manager down to 1826. Moses S. Phillips, Samuel B. H. Judah, Emanuel Judah and Jonas B. Phillips belong to the early part of the nineteenth century. The name of Mordecai Manual Noah again comes to the front. His career as a playwright began as early

as 1810, and Dunlap mentions the fact that most of his plays were eminently successful. Among these might be mentioned "The Grecian Captive," "The Fortress of Sorrento," "The New Constitution, the "Siege of Tripoli," and many others. From that day to this the stage owes no small debt to Jewish genius. The German theatre owes its permanency to the efforts of Heinrich Conried, and to-day most of the leading theatres are owned or conducted by men of the Jewish race, while Jewish actors and playwrights are constantly before the public.

If the community owes much to the Jew in the development of the stage, it is still more indebted to his genius in the development of music and the opera. New York had no such thing as a musical world until after the Revolution. John Howard Payne, the author of "Home, Sweet Home," was the son of a Jewish mother.

The credit for introducing Italian opera in New York in 1825 is generally given to Lorenzo Da Ponte, a Jew by race, who was also the author of the libretto of Mozart's "Don Giovanni" and "Figaro." Later, in the early thirties, Da Ponte endeavored to give Italian opera a permanent home

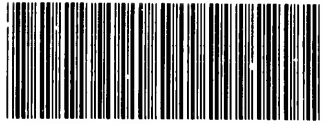
in New York. In this, however, he failed, and it was left to an Austrian Jew to achieve that result. This was Max Maretzek, who gave sixty consecutive performances of Italian operas in 1849. Shortly afterward opera received a further stimulus through the efforts of a Polish Jew, Moritz Strakosch, whose chief claim to fame, perhaps, lies ~~in~~ⁱⁿ the fact that he was the music teacher of Adelina Patti. Under his management and that of his brother, appeared for the first time in America Thalberg, Patti and Nilsson. Still later came Dr. Leopold Damrosch; the founder of the Oratorio and Symphony societies, and who may be styled the father of German Opera in America. The services of Maurice Grau and Heinrich Conried merely crown the continued efforts of Jews in this direction.

The names of Mosenthal, Joseffy, Brandeis, the Aaronsons and many others might be mentioned in the world of music, and the magnificent gifts of the Loeb family and others have done much to make New York, America's foremost musical centre.

All that the Jew has achieved, however, may be traced to the broad spirit of re-

ligious liberty, and to those free institutions which give privileges to none and equal opportunities to all. The American Jew strives to educate his children so as to fit them for something above and beyond the mere accumulation of money. When we reflect that the great masses of our poorer brethren are still in the throes of the mere struggle for existence, yet despite this fact, the children of the tenements are already crowding our colleges and our professional schools, looking upon the record of the past, may not the American Jew confidently expect that he will yet place in the crown of the Empire State's achievement, some of the brightest jewels that have ever graced that triple crown, of Science, of Literature and of Art.

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